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## STUDIES OF ART IN AMERICAN LIFE—IV

### IN NEGRO CABINS

To speak of the art side of negro life—and by this I mean not the life of the scattered freedmen, but the life of the negroes in the cotton-fields and canebrakes, on the plantations, in their Southern cabins—may seem like inviting a smile of incredulity. But it is nevertheless a fact that no race in the United States combines more fully the elements of artists in the best sense of the term than the negroes. And these elements of artistic nature, crushed almost into torpor, it may be, by oppression and servitude, manifest themselves in the most unexpected ways.

One of the closest students of the black men has said that they are born orators, painters, sculptors, musicians, and actors, whose talents have been dwarfed by the force of their unhappy lot. It is only occasionally that we find a Blind Tom attaining distinction in the music-halls, a Frederick Douglass on the rostrum, an Ira Aldridge on the stage, or a Henry O. Tanner in the studio. But the qualities that have made these particular men famous are natural characteristics of their race; and the cabins of plantation days, and of the reconstructed South, too, for that matter, are not without a genuine art life that needs but developing.

Speaking of the negro, J. E. Rankin, of Howard University, said: "The arts must wait with him, as they have waited with all races. But that in due time, in the higher flowering and fruitage which will surely come to him as he is more and more educated, as he commands leisure, as he has the means to expend and the time to use, these, too, will have their full share of his attention, I do not doubt."

The life of the negroes is essentially picturesque, and it is somewhat surprising that they have not been made more largely a theme for serious art. Certainly the race offers opportunities for artistic treatment that have been but scantily apprehended. Purpose books like "Uncle Tom's Cabin" have poorly represented their racial traits, and works like those of Joel Chandler Harris are calculated to emphasize the quaint and humorous side to the subordination of the higher and more serious. The conventional pictures of negro subjects, moreover, in which a slice of watermelon or a stolen chicken is an important feature, are caricatures savoring of wit and humor rather than faithful portrayals.

In a word, the artistic nature of the negroes as a race has been under the harsh spell of bondage, and as yet scarcely realizes that its

shackles have been stricken off; and the white man who has studied the slave and the freedman has scarcely recognized the rich artistic gifts with which nature has endowed the race. Alfred Tennyson, who admitted that the American colored artist whom he entertained at Faringford had alone caught the spirit of his "Lotus Eaters," and



THE CANE-FIELD

By Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr.

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Carlyle, who felt piqued at the well-supported statement that Frederick Douglass had apprehended and given expression to his whole philosophy, are exceptional cases of judgment. The frank admission of the one and the anger-flushed cheek of the other are little less than tributes to the black man.

It is a strange, uncouth life, this life of the swamps and of the plantations; a narrow, sordid, shiftless life; one calculated to repel as well as fascinate the Northerner. Perhaps it is not a matter of wonder, after all, that those who have visited the negroes in their Southern haunts should have been prone to criticise or smile at rather than take the people seriously. It requires a more intimate acquaintance than most observers are willing to cultivate to see behind the outer manifest evidences of ignorance, indigence, and, too often,



NEGRO HUTS AT WILMINGTON  
By J. M. Falconer



indifference, the witness of latent abilities and of a spirit that struggles to break through the accidents of condition and environment.

No one, for instance, but a person brought up in the South can



AUNT MAHALIE'S PETS

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appreciate the full significance of negro music. To others it is apt to be little more than a pleasing novelty. But the quaint old airs of plantation days, rich in their own peculiar melody, had and still have a peculiar charm. No music in the world is more replete with genuine sentiment, none is more pathetic and melancholy. Its essen-

tial burden is the *heimweh* which composers like Meyerbeer, Chopin, and Grieg have incorporated in their minor strains. It is a condition unconsciously embodied in an accent, and no people ever offered a more striking or touching scene than a group of plantation negroes voicing their flattened minor measures and accompanying the strains

with rhythmic motions of their bodies.



CABE

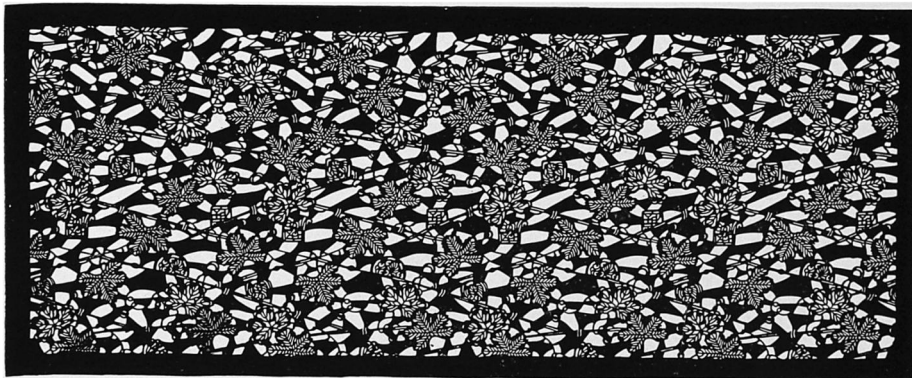
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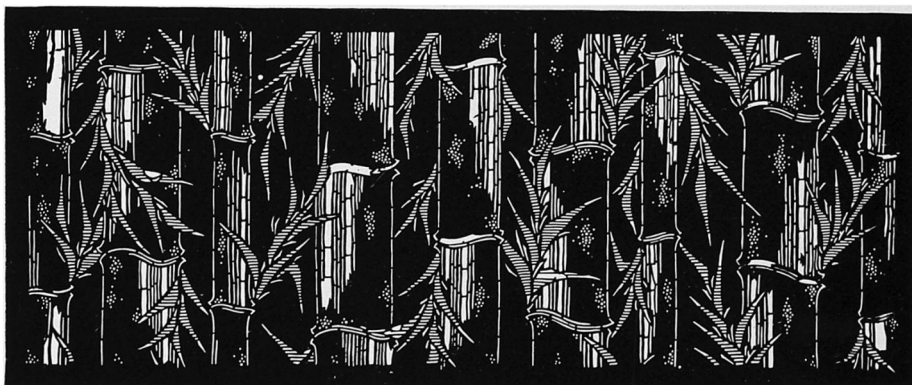
The days of slavery are past and gone; but to-day even the negro songs written by Northerners, and designed to embody something of the sentiment of the old time, have a warm place in the hearts of the multitude. "My Old Kentucky Home" in cultured communities ranks with "The Last Rose of Summer" as an encore piece; and "The Old Folks at Home," with its plaint of the exiles from Suwanee River, is scarcely less rich in sentiment than "Home, Sweet Home," with its lament of Paine, the exile from home. In brief, the cabin-door

concerts of the negroes or the plaintive choruses that enlivened their work in the fields are genuine elements of artistic life, worthy of being recorded in song, in literature, and in art.

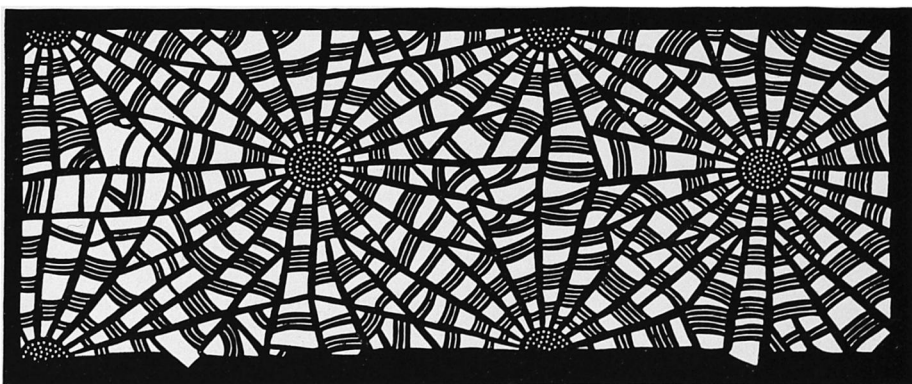
We are apt to forget in considering the attainments of negroes that there are some things in the line of æsthetics that, despite their ignorance and lowly condition, they have accomplished as no other residents of the United States have. In their folk-songs and folk-lore they stand preëminent. Indeed, theirs are the only folk-songs and folk-lore that we have. Stunted mentally and socially, as we are wont to think, without training in literature and music, the negro, as has been well said, has taken some of the melodies of his heart



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and sung them in the ear of the nations till they have listened entranced, some of these productions being just as genuine works of



THE OLD WELL

By Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr.

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art as the lyrics of Burns—breathings, as it were, of soul-sorrowing humanity after consolation, after comfort and support.

And so with the legends and stories that form so important



a feature in cabin entertainment. They were gathered from no one knows where; they, for the most part, have a pathetic seriousness; and they are replete with shrewd native wit and wisdom. Around the lowly cabins in twilight the negroes were wont to gather and beguile the time into the hours of darkness in one another's company. Singing and story-telling, in which in their own peculiar way they were experts, were the arts most cultivated, and the manner in which they indulged their love of music and romance lent a touch of the picturesque to every group of negro huts. Sordid as might be the life, shabby as might be the environments, one could but feel that among the negroes of the Old South there was a genuine art life seeking to break over the barriers with which misfortune had circumscribed it.

This marked development of folk-song and folk-lore, resulting in so many a strangely assorted but happy gathering of the negroes, is the more remarkable from the fact that it is usually in northern latitudes, where people have to combat the rigors of climate, and where they are obliged to while away the long evenings by the fireside, that folk-song and folk-lore have been most cultivated. The negro's penchant for this sort of entertainment betrays a native love of art that sought expression on the easiest and most natural lines.

Perhaps if the negro had had less to do with the hoe and more to do with the brush and palette, he might have developed in his cabin home a pictorial art as unique and as striking as his music and his legends. Certainly the life of the negroes offers as rich opportunities for the artist as for the poet, the romancer, the wit and humorist. Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr., in "Down South," has recently given us some snap-shots of negro scenes and characters that are remarkable, not less from their artistic character than for their suggestion of neglected opportunities. He has caught his subjects at apt moments, and has given us photographs of fine picture value that recall the old plantation days.

If the photographer can find serious, pathetic, striking art subjects in the cotton-fields, by the cabins, in the swamps, and in the lanes of the South, with the negroes alone as his characters, assuredly the artist, with his greater freedom of selection and elimination, could find ample and striking material for delineation. For the negroes of the Old South, despite the notoriety given them by their history, are to-day little known to the general public.

It has been said that the most inviting as well as the most accessible field of American romance is to be found in the old slave states, on the cotton, tobacco, and rice plantations. And the same is true, in a large measure, of art. It was and is a land of contrasts and contradictions, and in every phase of its life the negro, with his picturesque costume, his unique manners and customs, his superstitions, his fervor, was and is an ever-present character.

MARGARET M. HURLL.